

Locating Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Discourse on Corruption in Zimbabwe

by

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Abstract

In the interest of Zimbabwe's socio-economic transformation agenda, the scourge of corruption has to be stopped. This paper sought to accurately locate African indigenous knowledge systems focused specifically on Shona proverbs in the ongoing discourse on corruption. It is observed that indigenous knowledge systems do not condone corruption. The research established here is that any reference to African indigenous knowledge systems to justify corruption is a blatant misreading and abuse of African (Shona) indigenous knowledge. Thus, it is recommended that all citizens embrace the values of *hunhuism* (an African philosophy) in word and in deed for an sustainable socio-economic transformation. The paper is inspired by Afrocentric reasoning and therefore, made use of in-depth interview and critical text analysis in its methodology.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, corruption, proverbs, *unhu/ubuntu*, *hunhuism/Ubuntuism*

Introduction

There is no doubt, Zimbabwe like the overwhelming majority of Third World countries faces economic challenges engineered by the twin evils of slavery and colonisation as well as through pressure exerted by the unipolar world via globalisation. It should be noted that in Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular, the current economic dynamics have their roots firmly entrenched in an exotic European system that has its antecedents in slavery and colonisation. Through the intrusive colonial escapade by Europeans on African soil, the relations of production were transformed at the detriment of Africa's own age old indigenous systems. These systems found themselves alienated, irrelevant and constantly subverted by the new system.

Because of the unrelenting socio-economic challenges, especially in Africa South of the Sahara, there is a new thrust which focuses on home grown solutions to challenges. An inspiring fairy tale of the success story of the success of indigenous solutions to developmental challenges is the success story of the so-called Asian Tigers (China, Korea, India and Japan) (Mwaura in Katola, 2014). These countries have managed to turn around their socio-economic challenges through harnessing local knowledge systems, including their local languages. It is increasingly becoming evident that there will be no economic turnaround for African countries on the basis of foreign prescriptions.

Zimbabwe's case is unique; decades of economic recession exacerbated by Western imposed economic sanctions have driven the country's leadership and general citizenry into introspection. A major challenge which is working against any meaningful turnaround initiatives is the scourge of corruption. This ubiquitous scourge threatens and negates any positive signals of economic transformation, ultimately threatening to obliterate any gains made since independence.

Hence, in terms of definition, "Corruption is the perversion of integrity or state of affairs through bribery, favour or moral depravity ... It takes place when at least two parties have interacted to change the structure or processes of society or the behaviour of functionaries in order to produce dishonest, unfaithful or defiled situations" (Onigu in Lawal, 2007:2), and thus a deviation from the morally acceptable standard of doing business in pursuit of personal selfish gain.

Lawal (2007:1) citing a Policy Forum-Documents on "Corruption and Development in Africa" summarises the destructive effect of corruption thus:

Once corruption becomes entrenched, its negative effects multiply. It induces cynicism, because people begin to regard it as the norm. It undermines social values because people find it easier and more lucrative to engage in corruption than to seek legitimate employment. It erodes governmental legitimacy because it hampers the effective delivery of public goods and services. It limits economic growth because it reduces the amount of public resources, discourages private investment and saving and impedes the efficient use of government revenue and development assistance funds.

And furthermore, the abuse of public office for self-aggrandisement has led to a general sense of despondence in most countries as economic turnaround initiatives come to nought before they are even conceptualised, because of corruption. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher succinctly defined corruption through her detest for it by declaring that "You can't enjoy the fruits of effort without making the effort" (Lumumba, 2011:2). In Zimbabwe, just like in other Third World countries, the desire to get rich fast at whatever cost has weighed down on the economy. Hanson (2009:1) correctly observes that in Africa, corruption has resulted in "stunted" economic growth.

Unfortunately and sadly, according to Transparency International cited in Hanson (2009), of the ten countries considered most corrupt in the world, six of them are in Africa South of the Sahara which makes corruption a real evil which has to be tackled in the interest of socio-economic transformation. Thus, there is no doubt that any economic turnaround programme like the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) is dependent on “the quality of institutions of governance” (Kimenyi and Mbaku, 2011:30) as ZIMASSET is a programme of action crafted by the government of Zimbabwe in 2013 to arrest the economic decline, and spur the economy into positive growth through the use of local resources (ZIMASSET, 2013).

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Mapara (2009:140) defines indigenous knowledge systems as “a body of knowledge, or bodies of knowledge of the indigenous people of particular geographical areas that they have survived on for a very long time” which are linked to the communities which originate them. These indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are “the sum facts that are known or learned from experience or acquired through observation and study and handed down from generation to generation” (Mwaura in Chirimuuta et al 2012:2). Inevitably these knowledge systems cover all spheres of life of the people concerned. Thus, indigenous knowledge systems are “African ways of knowing” which define the African’s worldview and ways of knowing (Ngara, 2007:7).

Indigenous knowledge systems have stood stubborn to the destructive barrages of colonisation. The European colonial ‘adventure’ in Africa imposed foreign and alien knowledge systems on African communities. It was important for the colonist to dislocate the African from self, that is, from his/her culture, language, history, food and institutions. This cultural dislocation found ostensible expression in the geographical reorganisation done through renaming. The imperialists rode on a charade of smoke and mirrors and embarked on renaming the toponymic landscape as if the land did not have names prior to their coming. This renaming as a manifestation of indigenous knowledge systems was a colonial strategy to dispossess African people of their land through creating the smoke screen of a “terra nullius” – the impression that the land was vacant before the coming of colonialists (Helander, 2014:330). This renaming alongside the general subjugation and denigration of African systems like the forms of worship was meant to induce some form of ‘cultural shock in the African’. Everything African was subsequently subjugated and painted with a brush of inferiority and paganism. And these knowledge systems were “misunderstood, misinterpreted, ridiculed, and ignored during the scramble for and the colonization of Africa” (Ngara, 2007:8).

Unfortunately at the attainment of independence most African countries basked in the euphoria and glory of hoisting their flags, and yet the intricate maze and tentacles of colonialism had spread like a mat to critical pillars of the African way of life.

Today African countries (Zimbabwe included), fight against numerous vestiges of colonialism, some of which have morphed into very complicated cultural practices like corruption. A spiritual journey to rediscover the exact nature of African indigenous knowledge systems might assist to establish where the rain started to beat us (Achebe, 1975), and possibly provide a panacea for the challenges. Paradoxically even in the so-called developed countries, there is realisation that the colonial arrogance to disregard African civilisations was a fatal blunder as calamities like global warming which are galloping out of control as a result of globalisation and industrialisation and climate change seem to have their solutions in African traditional knowledge systems which were denigrated and continue to be denigrated by some conservative Eurocentrists. Hence, indigenous knowledge systems are the “adhesives” (Mawere, 2010:211) which hold the African community together. It is for this reason that this research focuses on Shona proverbs as an IKS, and storehouses of indigenous knowledge.

Hunhuism/Ubuntuism and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

It is critical to realise that the African preliterate times had a well-defined world view which was anchored in the philosophy of *hunhu/ubuntu*. The word *hunhu/ubuntu* is from the languages of Shona and Ndebele languages, respectively referring to the quality of being humane. The African philosophy of life has come to be understood as being guided by the philosophy of *ubuntu/hunhu*. Asante (2007:275) reveals that *ubuntu* is from the Xhosa and Zulu languages and it means “a union of allegiances and relationships”. A person who is guided by *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, and does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished when others are tortured or oppressed (Louw in Asante, 2007).

Samkange (1980) identifies three maxims of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism. First, hunhuism maintains that to be human is to recognize the humanity of others and establish respectful human relations with them; secondly if and when one is faced with a choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another person, then one should choose to preserve life, and the third is based on the saying that that the King owes his status, inclusive of his power, to the will of his subjects. It is evident that the third maxim applies to all those wielding power. It is a fact that corruption is not perpetrated by the weak and vulnerable members of the society, but by those who wield power in different forms within various socio-economic sectors of the country. All people who occupy certain stations in life should be exemplary in the way they exercise their power and authority over others.

The virtues of sharing, empathy, patience, sympathy and forgiveness are all encompassed in *ubuntu/hunhu*. The element of the collective in *ubuntu/hunhu* is even shown through the use of a clan name for a surname by male elders. This simply shows collective identity and responsibility. To call an elder by their first names is like undressing them, because the 'we' element of others is not there. This collective responsibility is shared even in dealing with crime and success.

Ubuntu/hunhu therefore means harmonious and humble co-existence with fellow human beings. It underscores the interconnectedness of human beings for mutual gain. There is therefore a mutually enriching relationship between *unhu/ubuntu* and indigenous knowledge systems. IKS promotes *unhu/ubuntu* and *unhu/ubuntu* in return inspires the whole framework of African indigenous knowledge systems.

Socio-Economic Transformation

Socio-economic transformation is a concept used to describe the positive changes injected in the socio-economic systems of a country. These changes imply positive development predicated on change which is "introduced into a system in order to produce a better production method and improved social arrangement" (Lawal, 2007:1). Velde (2013:1) defines socio-economic transformation as "moving labour from low to higher production levels". Hence socio-economic transformation is achieved when increased proportion of economic production is generated by other sectors apart from agriculture (Mpango, 2013; Wuyts & Kilama 2014). One result of socio-economic transformation is the general reduction of poverty and improved access to quality education (Mpango, 2013). In in this, most African countries are agro-based and have failed to transform due to a number of challenges; and one of the challenges which stifle growth and take the economy into a negative direction of growth is corruption. One key prerequisite for socio-economic transformation is transparency in both private and public sectors which results in the establishment of "high standards of employment in the public service, raise the levels of professionalism, discipline and commitment to serve" (ANC Policy Discussion Document, 2012:20).

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by Afrocentricity as a theoretical world view which puts the African in the place of agency (Asante, 2007). Afrocentricity as a theory simply advocates the adoption of Africa as the centre in terms of world view. The Afrocentrist believes in the reclamation of Africa's expropriated tangible and intangible heritage as a result of the calamities of enslavement and colonialism. Asante (1999: ix) asserts that Afrocentricity is "the relocation, the repositioning of the African in a place of agency where instead of being spectator to others, African voices are heard in the full meaning of history". Hence, it is about cultural restoration after years of dispossession through slavery, colonisation and even apartheid.

One area which was attacked through systematic vilification and sabotage is the area of indigenous knowledge systems as they manifest in medicine, spirituality and general nomenclature, especially in the geographical landscape. Through the systematic renaming of the toponymic landscape, and negative names for traditional institutions (for example witchdoctor for a herbalist) the colonists passed a vote of no confidence in African indigenous knowledge systems. However, proverbs are an age old manifestation of African wisdom constructed and refined through years of intercourse with the environment. And yet, the African focus does not in any way presuppose a radical rejection of foreign ways of knowing, but regards these as mere sources which assist in shaping the African world view without supplanting it with a completely new and alien perspective of the world.

The research questions in this study are: what is the nature of proverbs as indigenous knowledge systems, what is the relationship between proverbs and *ubuntu/hunhu*, and how are proverbs perceived in the discourse on corruption? Hence, qualitative research as a paradigm suitable in which researches seek to establish feelings and emotions, as well as attitudes. Creswell (2007:37) argues that qualitative research “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. And the most informative definition of qualitative research is given by Denzin and Lincoln (2005:3), thus:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”.

This study sought to understand the role of Shona proverbs as a form of indigenous knowledge systems within discourse on corruption in Zimbabwe. Information was gathered through informal interviews and through the analysis of secondary data in the form of previous studies on indigenous knowledge systems. Thus, this research is exploratory in nature. Kowalczyk (2015) maintains that exploratory research seeks among other things "to determine if what is being observed might be explained by a currently existing theory". Exploratory research lays the ground for future research, and it is the fervent conviction of the researcher that a lot of work still needs to be done in terms of accounting for the role of indigenous knowledge systems in addressing the current socio-economic challenges in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the Third World, particularly in former colonies.

And furthermore, this research also made use of in depth interviews of randomly chosen public servants, industrialists, students, and unemployed adults. Published literature on indigenous knowledge systems is also analysed as a valuable source of secondary data on indigenous knowledge systems.

Findings and Discussion

The findings in this study are presented and discussed along thematic lines of Shona proverbs as indigenous knowledge systems, proverbs as vehicles of Hunhuism, and the use and abuse of proverbs in discourse on corruption.

Hence, Shona proverbs are witty sayings which summarise age old wisdom of the Shona people. They are “summary statements of generalised truths that have accumulated over time through the experiences of preceding generations, and just like any other indigenous knowledge systems, they have been transmitted from generation to generation orally and freely” (Chadamoyo and Dumbu 2012:95 citing Hill 2004 and Matereke and Mapara, 2009). And proverbs are a storehouse of cultural beliefs which guide the young and old, the ruler and the ruled to make appropriate choices in different situations. As a strand of IKS, proverbs are educative; their “educational value lies in the fact that they are used by elders to teach youngsters about experiences of the past that they should emulate or avoid” (Mapara, 2009:145). Viriri and Mungwini (2010) argue that African people had their own world view (cosmology) which was undermined by the colonial establishment. This cosmology is portrayed through proverbs especially in Africa South of the Sahara. In reference, Bhebhe in Viriri and Mungwini (2010:29) argues that:

Before the European conquest of Africa, Africans had built up a pool of knowledge and technology which they used to sustain agriculture, human and animal health, industrial production involving food processing, metallurgy, leather tanning, timber seasoning, fermentation of beverages, making of dyes, mining and architectural engineering. But political subjugation by Europe so traumatized Africans that many of them lost confidence in and looked down upon their own culture.

Thus, African IKS proverbs were looked down upon by shutting them out of the school curriculum and instead promoting foreign ones, although most proverbs promoted moral uprightness, respect for authority and elders, cooperation, forgiveness, humility and self-restraint, for example:

- *Mhembwe rudzi inozvara mwana ane kazhumwi* [a buck bears a young one which resembles itself]
- *Gudo guru peta muswe kuti vadiki vakutye*; [An elderly baboon should not let loose its tail in order to gain respect from the young ones]
- *Mukuru mukuru hanga haigare bvunde* [A senior person will always be senior as a guinea fowl cannot perch on the tassel of a sweet cane]
- *mwana wamambo muranda kumwe* [A prince in his own land is a nonentity in a foreign land]
- *rume rimwe harikombi churu* [one man cannot encircle a hillock]
- *yafamba kamwe haiteyiwi* [do not set traps for a wild animal which has passed through for only once].

Chadamoyo and Dumbu (2012:93) aptly declare that “the ways the traditional African elders have used proverbs (*tsumo*) to successfully teach children about ways of behaving, are based on educational psychology principles”. Most proverbs work through implication always challenging the individual to reflect before embarking on a certain course of action. There might be need to carefully weigh the situation where tight decisions might be made, for example “*Chinono chinengwe bere rakadya richifamba* [A leopard is slow but a hyena eats whilst travelling] and *Usachimbidza kumedza kutsenga kuchada* [do not rush to swallow before you have chewed enough]. These proverbs encourage critical situational analysis. There is a realisation that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy in situations of life. These proverbs were and are still used in conversational discourse to strengthen an argument by appealing to undisputable evidence generated and refined by centuries of intercourse with the environment.

The African traditional way of life is a life where there is communion between humankind and nature; hence most of the proverbs are derived from the natural environment. Colonialism disturbed this communion through the outright dislocation of the indigenes and through the renaming of the toponymy in a foreign idiom, or through a corruption of the local names.

Thus there is overwhelming evidence which reveals the critical nature of Shona proverbs as a reservoir of indigenous knowledge systems and they in turn become a form of indigenous knowledge.

Second, proverbs are vehicles of Hunhuism and there is more than overwhelming evidence to indicate that proverbs promote *hunhu/ubuntu*. If *ubuntu/hunhu* is all about the spirit of family life, forgiveness, humility, sympathy, empathy and patience then proverbs are a storehouse of *hunhu/ubuntu*. The use of proverbs is usually accompanied by the phrase *Vakuru vakati....* [our fore fathers said....] or *vakuru vanoti....* [our grandfathers say.....] to indicate the sense of community and the need to abide by the expectations of elders who are custodians of *unhu/ubuntu*. Mapara (2009) observes that this manner of using proverbs is an appeal to the old or dead whose knowledge is indisputable.

Katola (2014) argues that the myriad of challenges Africa is facing can be addressed through inclusion of African traditional values in the education curriculum. He is convinced that once the values in African indigenous knowledge systems are taken seriously, the challenges of Africa which boasts of very educated personnel, but in itself, a very poor continent will come to an end. It is true to say, “The recognition and appreciation of IKS is a source of healing of therapeutic import, in the context of unhealthy imbalances, distortion, trivialization and neglect, as inflicted by Eurocentric education and governance. Tapping into the intellectual resources associated with IK is not only cost effective but also relevant and indispensable, for environmentally and ecologically sensitive activity” (Emeagwali, 2003:2).

Indeed by throwing away our indigenous knowledge systems we seem to have broken down the campus of the ship, and sadly we are caught up in a vicious storm of corruption, general poor governance and outright thuggery. Katola (2014:31) proffers what he feels to be the remedy:

The continent has witnessed violence, violation of human rights, corruption, injustice and oppression especially after attaining political independence. These problems were minimal in traditional African society because the education system inculcated the right values to an individual from childhood to adulthood. It was a holistic education, which took into account the social, economic cultural, spiritual and political aspects of life of the learner.

In particular situations, conclusions reveal that Shona, Oshivambo, Yoruba and Swahili proverbs “have vast potential in mitigating and possibly preventing conflict...” and also in “maintaining positive social relations with the rest of the world as is demanded by modern diplomacy and the quest for dignified social existence” (Makamani, n.d:1). In this context, Mawere (2010) also argues that IKS hold the key for Africa’s future by nurturing a morally correct and virtuous society while Gwavaranda (2011) sees some proverbs use in the capacity to prevent and even mitigate the effects of HIV-AIDS through promoting morally responsible citizens to prove the efficacy of indigenous knowledge systems. IKS can also be used as part of the arsenal to deconstruct the colonial myths of the superiority of the white man, and his so called civilising mission to Africa; Mapara (2009) rightly sees IKS as an extension of post-colonial theory, which seeks to deconstruct the myth of inferiority of African people.

And third, even though there is overwhelming literature to suggest that indigenous knowledge systems are critical in inculcating positive moral values, years of denigration as a result of colonisation and Christianity has resulted in the creation of negative attitudes towards IKS among indigenes. The interviews carried out in this exercise with a sample of people from different stations in life purposively sampled exposes the need for cultural decolonisation to eradicate negative perceptions towards indigenous knowledge systems. What the interviewees meant and understood by the proverbs is given in square brackets.

When asked on whether they value Shona proverbs, students at university said, “*I do not think it’s necessary now in the age of globalisation. English can do it all*”.

One public servant in justifying corruption said, “*proverbs are important, they teach us to be wise, for example Chawawana idya nehama mutorwa ane hanganwa*” [you should spend what you have acquired with relatives because foreigners easily forget - implying that take care of your relatives through nepotism, corruption etc.];

“*mbudzi inofura payakasungirirwa*” [a goat grazes around where it is tied – implying that taking bribes is a normal incentive obtained from one’s work, environment etc.].

One elderly man said, “*ikozvino changova chizivano, Kusina mai hakuendwi*” [nowadays what matters is who you know, you should not venture where no one knows you – meaning that if you go where there is no friend or relative of yours you will be treated badly].

Industrialist: “it is dog eat dog my friend, *Kakara kununa hudya kamwe uye shiri yakangwara inovaka dendere rayo neminhenga yedzimwe*” [a fat animal eats other animals and a clever bird builds a nest from other birds’ feathers – implying that to succeed one has to take advantage/exploit others].

The above excerpts indicate how the general citizenry twist the meaning of proverbs to justify corruption. This is a narrow application and deliberate abuse of IKS which amounts to a dishonest and corrupt use of the knowledge system. To consider proverbs outside the framework of *unhu/ubuntu* is an aberration. The individual is always part of the wider society, hence the *ubuntu/unhu* philosophy says, “I am because we are; We are because I am”. Hunhuism sees relationships as a set of indispensable interconnections which have no room for self-aggrandisement. Where there is *hunhu/ubuntu*, there is no room for ‘cannibalistic’ behaviour which is evident in all sectors of the economy.

Pressed further to reveal if the proverbs indeed promote corrupt tendencies, all the interviewed respondents indicated that deep down they know that corruption is un-African. This shows that those who hide behind Shona proverbial teachings are hiding behind a smokescreen of lies. This is also proof that in the moral conscience of the African, there is always a voice which laments the deviant conduct of corruption. And moreover, the use of public office for personal and private gain is immoral and is not part of what IKS teach.

Traditional African communities are known for compassion and care as well as selflessness in dealing with those in need. This is why concepts like *Zunde ramambo* [a chief's collective strategic reserve to help the needy] were put in place to ensure that the whole community has adequate food. And even the fraudulently taking someone's property through corruption was taken care of by reporting the person to the authorities or through spiritual solutions like 'rukwa' (traditional spiritual fencing of private property) (Mawere, 2010).

Conclusions

Corruption is alien to the African philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*. The roots of corrupt behaviour are ostensibly in the grand historical charades of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, which are deceptive and patently corrupt historical misfortunes. There is a real possibility that through the promotion of Shona proverbial teachings as indigenous knowledge systems, the current challenge of unmitigated corruption can be broken. IKS "have a potential to boost moral probity among the Shonas and, by extension, African people. They constitute a foundation for the establishment of a morally virtuous society" (Mawere, 2010: 219). And notwithstanding, there is need to decolonise the mind-set of African people to reorient and exorcise their negative perception towards African history and traditions in order to realise that we are not pathologically corrupt, but responsible citizens, averse to corruption of any form; and only then can we realise real socio-economic transformation.

As a way forward, this research identifies that there should be a robust approach to curriculum review to include IKS from Early Childhood Education to the university level; there should be public campaigns to promote IKS; there should be anti-corruption committees at village, ward, and district level up to national level to nip corruption in the bud; there should be massive production of literature on the value of different forms of IKS; periodic reorientation of public and private sector workers to promote ethical conduct grounded in IKS should be done; and whistle blowers who report corrupt activities, should be incentivised.

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